Beyond the Frontier

by RANDALL PARRISH

A Romance of Early Days in the Middle West

Author of "Keith of the Border," "My Lady of Doubt," "The Maid of the Forest," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV—Continued.

—18—

I cannot describe my feelings—joy, sorrow, memory of the past overwhelming me. My eyes were wet with tears, and I could find no words. D'Artigny seemed to understand, yet he made no effort to speak, merely holding me close with his strong arm. So in silence, our minds upon the past and the future, we followed the savages through the black night along the dim trail. For the time I forgot where I was, my weird, ghastly surroundings, the purpose of our stealthy advance, and remembered only my father, and the scenes of childhood. He must have comprehended, for he made no attempt to interrupt my reverie, and his silence drew me closer—the steady pressure of his arm brought me peace.

Suddenly before us loomed the shadow of the great rock, which rose a mighty barrier across the trail, its crest outlined against the sky. The Indians had halted here, and we pressed forward through them, until we came to where the chief and La Forest waited. There was a growing tinge of light in the eastern sky, enabling us to perceive each other's faces. All was tense, expectant, the Indians scarcely venturing to breathe, the two white men conversing in whispers. Sequitah stood motionless as a statue, his lips tightly closed.

"Your scouts ventured no farther?" questioned D'Artigny.

"No; 'twas not safe; one man scaled the rock, and reports the Iroquois just beyond."

"They hide in covert where I suspected them; but I would see with my own eyes. There is crevice here, as I remember, to give foothold. Ay, here it is, an easy passage enough. Come, La Forest, a glance ahead will make clear my plans."

The two clambered up noiselessly, and outstretched themselves on the flat surface above. The dawn brightened, almost imperceptibly, so I could distinguish the savage forms on either side, some standing, some squatting on the grass, all motionless but alert, their weapons gleaming, their cruel eyes glittering from excitement. La Forest descended cautiously and turned toward me.

"Madame, D'Artigny would have you join him."

Surprised at the request I rested my foot in his hand, and crept forward along the smooth surface until I lay beside Rene. He glanced aside into my face.

"Do not lift your head," he whispered. "Peer through this cleft in the stone."

Before us was a narrow opening, devoid of vegetation, a sterile patch of stone and sand, and beyond this a fringe of trees, matted with underbrush below so as to make good screen, but sufficiently thinned out above, so that, from our elevation, we could look through the interlaced branches across the cleared space where the timber had been chopped away to the palisades of the fort. The first space was filled with warriors, crouching behind the cover of underbrush. Most of these were lying down, or upon their knees, watchfully peering through toward the fort gates, but a few were standing, or moving cautiously about bearing word of command.

"Monsieur," I whispered timidly, "you can never attack; there are too many."

"They appear more numerous than they are," he answered confidently, "but it will be a stiff fight. Not all Tuscaroras either; there are Eries yonder to the right, and a few renegade Mohawks with them. Look, by the foot of that big tree, the fellow in war bonnet and deerskin shirt—what make you of him?"

"A white man in spite of his paint."

"'Twas my guess also. I thought it likely they had a renegade with them, for this is not Indian strategy. La Forest was of the same opinion, although 'twas too dark when he was here for us to make sure."

"For what are they waiting and watching?"

"The gates to open, no doubt. If they suspect nothing within, they will send out a party soon to reconnoiter the trail, and reach the river below for water. It is the custom, and, no doubt, these devils know, and will wait their chance. They urge the laggards now."

We lay and watched them, his hand clasping mine. Those warriors who had been lying prone rose to their knees, and, weapons in hand, crouched for a spring; the chiefs scattered, careful to keep concealed behind cover. Not a sound reached us, every movement noiseless, the orders conveyed by gesture of the hand. D'Artigny pressed my fingers.

"Action will come soon," he continued, his lips at my ear, "and I must be ready below to take the lead. You can serve us best here, Adele; there is no safer spot if you lie low. You have a bit of cloth—a handkerchief?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then watch the fort gates, and if you see them open drop the cloth over the edge of the rock there in signal. I will wait just below, but from where we are we can see nothing. You understand?"

"Surely, monsieur; I am to remain here and watch; then signal you when the fort gates open."

"Ay, that is it; or if those savages advance into the open—they may not wait."

"Yes, monsieur."

His lips touched mine, and I heard him whisper a word of endearment.

"You are a brave girl."

"No, monsieur; I am frightened, terribly frightened, but—but I love you, and am a Frenchwoman."

He crept back silently, and I was left alone on the great rock, gazing out anxiously into the gray morning.

CHAPTER XXV.

The Charge of the Illini.

It seemed a long time, yet it could scarcely have exceeded a few moments, for the light of early dawn was still dim and spectral, making those savage figures below appear strange and inhuman, while, through the tree barrier, the more distant stockade was little more than a vague shadow. I could barely distinguish the sharp-pointed logs, and if any guard passed, his movements were indistinguishable.

Had I not known where they were, even the position of the gates would have been a mystery. Yet I lay there, my eyes peering through the cleft in the rock, every nerve in my body throbbing. All had been intrusted to me; it was to be my signal which would send D'Artigny, La Forest, and their Indian allies forward. I must not fail them; I must do my part. Whatever the cost—even though it be his life—nothing could absolve me from this duty.

The Iroquois were massing toward the center, directly in front of the closed gates. The change in formation was made with all the stealthiness of Indian cunning, the warriors creeping silently behind the concealing bushes, and taking up their new positions according to motions of their chiefs. Those having rifles loaded their weapons, while others drew knives and tomahawks from their belts, and held them glittering in the gray light. The white leader remained beside the big tree, paying no apparent heed to anything excepting the stockade in front. The daylight brightened, but mist clouds overhung the valley, while floating wreaths of fog drifted between the great rock and the fort gates, occasionally even obscuring the Iroquois in vaporous folds. There was no sound, no sight, of those hidden below, waiting my word. I seemed utterly alone.

Suddenly I started, lifting myself slightly on one arm, so as to see more clearly. Ay, the gates were opening, slowly at first, as though the great wooden hinges made resistance; then the two leaves parted, and I had a glimpse within. Two soldiers pushed against the heavy logs, and, as they opened wider, a dozen or more men were revealed, leaning carelessly on their rifles. Boisrondet, bearing gun in the hollow of his arm, stepped forward into the opening, and gazed carelessly about over the gray, mist-shrouded scene.

The arm of the white renegade shot into the air, and behind him the massed Iroquois arose to their feet, crouching behind their cover ready to spring. I reached over the rock edge, and dropped the handkerchief.

I must have seen what followed, yet I do not know; the incidents seem burned on my memory, yet are so confused I can place them in no order. The white renegade seemed waiting, his arm upraised. Ere it fell in signal to dispatch his wild crew to the slaughter, there was a crash of rifles all about me, the red flare leaping into the gray mist—a savage yell from a hundred throats, and a wild rush of naked bodies.

I saw warriors of the Iroquois fling up their arms and fall; I saw them shrink and shrivel, break ranks and run. Surprised, stricken, terrified by the warwhoops of the maddened Illini, realizing only that they were caught between enemies, their one and only thought was escape. Two of their chiefs were down, and the white renegade, stumbling and falling as though also hurt, dived into the underbrush.

Before they could rally, or even comprehend what had occurred, their assailants were upon them. Leaping across the open, over rock and sand, yelling like fiends, weapons gleaming in the dull light, the frenzied Illini, enflamed with revenge, maddened with hate, flung themselves straight at them. Rifles flashed in their faces, tomahawks whirled in the air, but nothing stopped that rush. Warriors fell, but the others stumbled over the naked bodies. I saw D'Artigny, stripped to his shirt, and that in rags from the bushes he had plunged through, his rifle barrel gripped, a yard in front of them all. I saw La Forest, bare headed, and Sequitah, his Indian stoicism forgotten in mad blood lust.

Then they struck and were lost in the fierce maelstrom of struggle, striking, falling, red hands gripping at red throats, rifle butts flung high, tomahawks dealing the death blow, knives gleaming as sinewy arms drove them home. I could not longer distinguish enemy from friend; they were interlocked, struggling like mad dogs, fighting as devils might, a wild, tangled mass of bodies, of waving hair, of blazing eyes, of uplifted steel.

The Iroquois had rallied from their first shock; already they realized the small number of the attackers. Those who had fled were turning back; those on either flank were running toward the scene of fight. I saw the white renegade burst from the press, urging these laggards forward. Scarcely had he attained the outer edge, when D'Artigny fought his way forth also, tearing the mass asunder with sweep of rifle. They stood face to face, glaring into each other's eyes.

The rifle in D'Artigny's hand was but a twisted bar of iron; the renegade's only weapon was a murderous knife, its point reddened with blood. What word was said, I know not, but I saw D'Artigny fling his bar aside, and draw the knife at his belt. Mon Dieu! I could not look; I know not how they fought; I hid my eyes and prayed. When I glanced up again both were gone, the fighting mass was surging over the spit—but the Iroquois were in flight, seeking only some means of escape, while out through the fort gates the soldiers of the garrison were coming on a run, pouring volleys of lead into the fleeing savages. I saw De Tonty, De Baugis, De la Durantaye—ay! and there was M. Cassion, back among the stragglers, waving his sword gallantly in the air. It was all over with so quickly I could but sit and stare; they ran past me in pursuit, wild yells echoing through the woods, but all I thought of then was M. d'Artigny. I scrambled down the rock, falling heavily in my haste, yet once upon my feet again, rushed forth, reckless of danger. The ground was strewn with dead and wounded, the victorious Illini already scattered in merciless, headlong pursuit. Only a group of soldiers remained at the edge of the forest. Among these were De Tonty and La Forest. Neither noticed my approach until I faced them.

"What, madame," exclaimed De Tonty, "you here also?" he paused as though in doubt, "and the Sieur d'Artigny—had he part in this feat of arms?"

"A very important part, monsieur," returned La Forest, stanching a wound on his forehead, yet bowing gallantly to me. "'Twas indeed his plan, and I permitted him command as he knows these Illini Indians better than I."

"But does he live, monsieur?" I broke in anxiously.

"Live! ay, very much alive—see, he comes yonder now. Faith, he fought Jules Lescalles knife to knife, and ended the career of that renegade. Is that not a recommendation, M. de Tonty?"

The other did not answer; he was watching D'Artigny approach, his eyes filled with doubt. I stepped forward to greet him, with hands outstretched. He was rags from head to foot, spattered with blood, an ugly wound showing on one cheek, yet his lips and eyes smiled.

"'Twas good work, well done," he said cheerily. "'Twill be a while before the Iroquois besiege this fort again. Is that not your thought, M. de Tonty?"

"I appreciate the service rendered," replied the other gravely. "But you are in peril here. M. Cassion is yonder, and still in command."

D'Artigny glanced inquiringly at La Forest, and the latter stepped forward a leather-bound packet in his hands.

"Your pardon, M. de Tonty," he said. "I had forgotten my true mission here. I bear orders from the king of France."

"From Louis? La Salle has reached the king's ear?"

"Ay, good results. These are for you, monsieur."

De Tonty took them, yet his thought was not upon their contents but with his absent chief.

"You saw Sieur de la Salle in France? You left him well?"

"More than well—triumphant over all his enemies. He sails for the mouth of the great river with a French colony; Louis authorized the expedition."

"And is that all?"

"All, except it was rumored at the court that La Barre would not for long remain governor of New France."

The face of the Italian did not change expression; slowly he opened the papers, and glanced at their contents; then folded them once more, and lifted his eyes to our faces.

"By grace of the king," he said simply, "I am again in command of Fort St. Louis."

We made our way slowly through the fringe of woods, and across the open space before the fort gates, which still stood open. Cassion had disappeared; indeed, there was not so much as a single guard at the gate when we entered, yet we were greeted instantly by his voice.

"'Tis well you return, M. de Tonty," he said loudly. "I was about to call those soldiers yonder, and close the gates. 'Tis hardly safe to have them left thus with all these strange Indians about."

"They are Illini, monsieur—our allies."

"Pah! an Indian is an Indian to my mind; bid M. de la Durantaye come hither." He stared at D'Artigny and me, seeing us first as he stepped forward. A moment he gasped, his voice failing; then anger conquered, and he strode forward, sword in hand.

"Mon Dieu! What is this? You here again, you bastard wood ranger? I had hopes I was rid of you, even at the cost of a wife. Well, I soon will be. Here, Durantaye, bring your men; we have a prisoner here to stretch rope. De Tonty, I command you in the name of France!"

The point of his sword was at D'Artigny's breast, but the younger man stood motionless, his lips smiling, his eyes on the other's face.

"Perchance, monsieur," he said quietly, "it might be best for you first to speak with this friend of mine."

"What friend? Sacre! What is the fellow to me? Who is he—another one of La Salle's spawn?"

La Forest, still bareheaded, his forehead bleeding, pressed down the sword-blade.

"The company is a good one," he said bluntly enough, "and just now well worth belonging to. I am Francois de la Forest, monsieur, one-time commandant at Detroit; at present messenger from the king of France."

"King's messenger—you! Mon Dieu! you look it. Come, man, what mummery is this?"

"No mummery, monsieur. I left France two months since, bearing the king's own word to M. la Barre. 'Tis with his indorsement I journeyed hither to restore Henri de Tonty to his rightful command of Fort St. Louis."

"You lie!" Cassion cried hotly, eyes blazing hatred and anger, "'tis some hellish trick."

"Monsieur, never before did man say that to me, and live. Were you not felon and thief, I would strike you where you stand. Ay, I mean the words—now listen; lift that sword point, and I shoot you dead. Monsieur de Tonty, show the man the papers."

Cassion took them as though in a daze, his hand trembling, his eyes burning with malignant rage. I doubt if he ever saw clearly the printed and written words of the document, but he seemed to grasp vaguely the face of La Barre's signature.

"A forgery," he gasped. "Ah, De Baugis, see here; these damned curs of La Salle would play a trick on me. Look at the paper."

The dragoon took it, and smoothed it out in his hands. His face was grave, as his eyes searched the printed lines.

"'Tis the great seal of France," he said soberly, looking about at the faces surrounding him, "and the signature of the governor. How came it here?"

"By my hand," returned La Forest proudly. "You know me—Monsieur Francois la Forest."

"Ay, I know you, ever a follower of La Salle, and friend of Frontenac. 'Twas through his influence you got this. 'Tis little use for us to quarrel, M. Cassion—the order is genuine."

"Mon Dieu, I care not for such an order; it does not supersede my commission; I outrank this De Tonty."

"Hush, do not play the fool."

"Better the fool than the coward."

"Wait," said La Forest sharply, "the matter is not ended. You are Francois Cassion of Quebec?"

"Major of infantry, commissaire of the Governor La Barre."

"So the titles read in this document. I arrest you by king's order for treason to France, and mutilation of official records. Here is the warrant, M. de Baugis, and your orders to convey the prisoner to Quebec for trial."

Cassion Leaped Forward and Drove Sword Point Into D'Artigny.

Cassion's face went white, and he struggled madly for breath. De Baugis grasped the paper, so startled at this new development as to be incapable of comprehension.

"Under arrest? For what, monsieur? Treason, and mutilation of official records? What does it mean?"

"This—the man knows, and will not deny the charge. False testimony sworn to, and signed by this Francois Cassion, charged Captain la Chesnayne with cowardice and treason. In consequence the latter was broken of his command, and his estates forfeited to the crown. Later, through the efforts of Frontenac, the king was convinced of injustice, and the estates were restored by royal order. This order reached Quebec, but was never recorded. This Cassion was then private secretary to the governor, and the paper came into his hands. Later, to hush up the scandal, he married Captain la Chesnayne's daughter against her will. The day this was accomplished the lost order was placed on file."

"You saw it?"

"Yes, I had the files searched secretly. The order was dispatched from France five years ago, but was stamped as received the day Cassion departed from Quebec."

My eyes were upon the speaker, and I failed to note how the accused met this damning charge. It was his voice which drew my attention—high-pitched harsh, unnatural.

"Mon Dieu! 'twas not I—'twas La Barre!"

"Tell that in Quebec; though little good 'twill do you. M. de Baugis, in the king's name I order this man's arrest."

I saw De Baugis step forward, his hand outstretched; then all was confusion and struggle. With the hoarse snarl of a beast, Cassion leaped forward, struck La Forest with his shoulder, and drove sword point into D'Artigny. De Tonty gripped him, but was hurled aside by insane strength, reeling back so that the weight of his body struck me to my knees. The next instant, his sword point dripping blood, the runner was beyond reach, speeding for the open gate. What followed I know from word of others, and no view I had of it.

D'Artigny had fallen, huddled in a heap on the grass, and I dragged myself to him on my knees. I heard oaths, a shuffling of feet, a rush of bodies, a voice I did not recognize shouting some order—then the sharp crack of a rifle, and silence. I cared not what had occurred; I had D'Artigny's head in my arms, and his eyes opened and smiled up at me full of courage.

"You are badly hurt?"

"No, I think not; the thrust was too high. Lift me, and I breathe better The man must have been mad."

"Surely yes, monsieur; think you he had hope of escape?"

"'Tis likely he thought only of revenge. Ah, you are here also, De Tonty."

"Yes, lad; there is small use for me yonder. You are not seriously struck?"

"I bleed freely, but the thrust was in the shoulder. I could stand, I think, with your aid."

On his feet he leaned heavily on us both, yet would not be led away, until La Forest joined us. He held in his hand some papers, yet neither of us questioned him.

"Monsieur de Tonty," he said, "I would have private word with you."

"When I help D'Artigny to his bed, and have look at his wound. Yet is it not matter of interest to these as well?"

"I take it so."

"Then speak your message—M. Cassion is dead?"

"The sentry's bullet found his heart, monsieur."

"I saw him fall. Those papers were upon him—are they of value?"

"That I know not; they possess no meaning to me, but they were addressed to the man killed at St. Ignace."

"Hugo Chevet?" I exclaimed. "My uncle; may I not see them, monsieur?"

De Tonty placed them in my hands—a letter from a lawyer in Quebec, with a form of petition to the king, and a report of his search of the archives of New France. The other document was the sworn affidavit of Jules Beaubaou, a clerk of records, that he had seen and read a paper purporting to be a restoration from the king to the heirs of Captain la Chesnayne. It was signed and sealed. I looked up at the faces surrounding me; startled and frightened at this witness from the dead.

"They are papers belonging to Chevet?" asked De Tonty.

"Yes, monsieur—see. He must have known, suspected the truth before our departure, yet had no thought such villainy was the work of M. Cassion. He sought evidence."

"That is the whole story, no doubt. La Barre learned of his search, for he would have spies in plenty, and wrote his letter of warning to Cassion. The latter, fearing the worst, and desperate, did not even hesitate at murder to gain possession of these documents. Fate served him well, and gave him D'Artigny as a victim. I wonder only that he did not long ago destroy the papers."

"There is always some weakness in crime," commented La Forest, "and the man has paid penalty for his. It would be my guess he desired to place them in La Barre's hands in proof of his loyalty. But, messieurs, D'Artigny needs to have his wound dressed. We can discuss all this later."

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It was two days later, and the bright sunshine rested on Fort St. Louis, flecking the sides of the great rock with gold, and bridging the broad valley below. D'Artigny, yet too weak to rise unaided, sat in a chair Barbeau had made beside the open window, and to his call I joined him, my arm on his shoulder as I also gazed down upon the scene below. It was one of peace now, the silvery Illinois winding hither and yon among its green islands, the shadowy woods darkening one bank, and the vast meadows stretching northward from the other. Below the bend an Indian village, already rebuilt and occupied, slept in the sun, and I could see children and dogs playing before the tepees.

Down the sharp trail from the fort a line of Indian packers were toiling slowly, their backs supporting heavy burdens, which they bore to two canoes resting against the bank. About these were grouped a little party of white men, and when at last the supplies were all aboard, several took their places at the paddles, and pushed off into the stream.

There was waving of hands, and one among them—even at that distance I could tell La Forest—looked up at our window, and raised his hat in gesture of farewell. I watched until they rounded the rock and disappeared on their long journey to Quebec, until the others—exiles of the wilderness—turned away and began to climb upward to the fort gates. D'Artigny's hand closed softly over mine.

"You are sad, sweetheart; you long, too for New France?"

"No, dear one," I answered, and he read the truth in my eyes. "Wherever you are is my home. On this rock in the great valley we will serve each other—and France."

THE END.

Something New, Please.

"Can you bear it if I tell you something serious?" ventured the young husband.

"Yes; don't keep anything from me," gasped the bride.

"Remember, this does not mean that my love for you is growing less."

"Don't break my heart. What is it?"

"Well, my dear, I'm getting tired of angel food every day for dinner. Would it be too much to ask you to have liver and onions?"

Saskatchewan, Canada, offers an inviting market for American clothing, groceries and machinery.

Good Reason.

"Oh! Why did I every marry you?"

"Because I didn't know any better."—Life.

WOMAN HAD TRUE CHARITY

Refusal to Judge Others Harshly Proves Possession of the Highest Christian Character.

There died a short time ago a woman who never occupied, or aspired to occupy, a conspicuous position in the world but who was beloved by all who knew her. The secret of her charm lay in her charity—not the charity of almsgiving, although she was always openhanded to those in need—but the broader charity that consists in leniency toward the frailties of others. When gossip, even gossip not unduly harsh, assailed man or woman she invariably met it with the one response:

"Well, now, maybe if you knew all about the case you'd find the poor man (or woman) wasn't so much to blame after all."

What an insight into a Christian character that remark conveys. And what a lesson in Christian charity it teaches. It is the Ten Commandments in a single sentence. Philosopher or theologian never uttered a more beautiful thought for mankind to ponder over. Epigram maker never directed a more perfect shaft.

What a different world it would be if everyone judged the world's people that way.—Youngstown Telegram.

Stuck.

He—I can marry any woman I please.

She—But can you please any?